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ABSTRACT

A reply to "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism," a 1982 article written by E. Croasmun and R. A. Cherwitz, this paper suggests that that article suffers from a poor choice and unclear usage of language, a weak line of argument, and a faulty conceptualization of the issues. The first section of the paper reviews the arguments presented by Croasmun and Cherwitz, while the second examines the process by which they developed those arguments. The third section explores the three major examples they employ to support their theses, and the final section offers suggestions on directions open to rhetoricians and communication scholars once they overcome their fear of relativism. (FL)

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Beyond the Fear of Relativism:
A Reply to Croasmun and Cherwitz

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Introduction

This essay is a reply to Croasmun and Cherwitz's article, "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism."[1] I shall demonstrate that their article suffers from an unfortunate choice and unclear usage of language, a weak line of argument, and a faulty conceptualization of the issues. For these reasons, Croasmun and Cherwitz miss the point that it is possible to affirm the role of consensus in the social construction of reality without falling victim to any of the ills, including "rhetorical relativism," of which they seem to be afraid. I shall suggest that there is nothing to fear in holding to a "strong" view of rhetoric--summarized by Rorty in the aphorism: "...our only usable notion of 'objectivity' is 'agreement'."[2]

The first section of this essay is devoted to getting a clear picture of the theses presented by Croasmun and Cherwitz. The second section reviews the process by which they develop their argument. The third section examines the three major examples that they employ to support their theses. The final section offers some suggestions on directions open to rhetoricians and communication scholars once the fear of relativism is overcome.

I

Croasmun and Cherwitz assert that "truth and reality can and should be considered as existing apart from social agreement about them." Second, they maintain that "rhetoric, if viewed as an act of striving for audience adherence and consensus, can be a tool of critical inquiry which moves its practitioner (whether scientist, philosopher, or public communicator) toward apprehending reality."[3] These are not, I submit, especially useful claims.

The former assertion apparently means that objects or 'facts' (Their

examples include the sun being at the center of the solar system and the biological fact that men cannot bear children.) have existence independent of social agreements. But surely this is a trivial assertion: only the most extreme skeptic would oppose it, and none of the social knowledge theorists (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, Scott, and Brummet) Croasmun and Cherwitz want to critique take such an extreme position. In the history of the social knowledge tradition, in fact, few if any theorists have doubted or denied existence simpliciter. They have denied, instead, knowledge simpliciter. Consider, for example, the constructivists who, following Kelly, assume the existence of an obdurate world of objects against which persons compare their interpretations. It would be a caricature to have them saying that the Rocky Mountains are constructive accomplishments of social actors, although social knowledge (attributions) are an entirely different matter.

So Croasmun and Cherwitz s assertion must mean not that the relativists deny physical reality but that they deny the existence of a truth "out there, waiting to be found." It might be objected that this is the same thing if one's conception of the truth "out there" corresponds too closely to the object language views of truth that sometimes are associated with the ancient Greeks. Below, I shall consider whether this might be a significant objection to Croasmun and Cherwitz's project.

Now, however, I want to make the claim that Croasmun and Cherwitz proceed toward a remarkably tame thesis, namely, "...the view that the argumentative seeking of consensus is a means of gaining knowledge is superior to the alternative view that the existence of a consensus in itself 'creates' knowledge,"[4] via arguments which are unncessarily strong and which confuse their point. Apparently, their point is a straightforward

claim that consensuses are how we get knowledge but are not entirely dependable guarantors that everything vouched for by consensus is 'true'.

II

At least part of the confusion stems from a failure to define terms, such as "knowledge," "truth," and "reality." I submit that one of the most serious defects in Croasmun and Cherwitz's article is their dependence upon these undefined concepts. How do Croasmun and Cherwitz know that "rhetoric... can be a tool of critical inquiry which moves its practitioner...toward apprehending reality"? In the same vein, how can they (a priori) know that there is something called "truth" out there waiting to be discovered or gained in light of their assertion that truth is something toward which we strive?

In addition to the serious logical problems inherent in their position, I also contend that their article suffers from other substantive conceptual problems because of their reliance upon traditional language usage. Rorty offers the convincing argument that, since the seventeenth century, the notion of representation has dominated much of Western philosophical thinking.[5] Philosophers have operated from the misleading metaphor of the mind as the mirror of nature. When Croasmun and Cherwitz speak of "apprehending reality" or "attaining truth," or when they make the traditional distinctions between objectivity/subjectivity and absolutism/relativism, they are open to the same criticisms that Rorty articulates against the philosophical tradition that is devoted to discovering the correspondence between thought or language and the world.

Croasmun and Cherwitz's argument displays a second serious fault.

Much of their exposition relies upon what I take to be contrived either/or propositions. For example, they assert: (a) Either consensus creates reality or reality is independent of social agreement; (b) Either this intersubjective choice is rooted in something or it is arbitrary; (c) Truth is either created or sought; (d) Knowledge must be defined either in definitional or methodological terms; (e) Either one accepts a non-consensual view of truth or else one cannot say "I changed my mind." without necessarily being involved in a contradiction; and (f) Either we make a firm distinction between appearance and reality or else we are reduced to a pluralism of social realities and unchecked relativism.

I object to (a) through (f) initially on the logical grounds that there is no dilemma if one does not accept the choice of terms presented by Croasmun and Cherwitz as constituting the horns of the dilemma. In each of the cases above, therefore, we can disarm the logical force of Croasmun and Cherwitz's argument simply by indicating that the options that they present are not the only options available. Moreover, (a) through (d) can be attacked on the grounds that Croasmun and Cherwitz confuse Kant's argument that the knower does not affect the known with arguments about social reality where surely the knower does affect the known. Their assertion (e) seems to be entirely mistaken on the grounds that disagreement with one consensus always leaves open the possibility of agreement with another consensus. I see no contradiction in the movement, for instance, of an individual from the Republican to the Democratic Party. Finally, (f) represents Croasmun and Cherwitz's thesis. As such, it is an assertion and not an argument.

The third serious flaw in Croasmun and Cherwitz's argument is their

reliance upon appeals to authority to support their thesis. I find it to be rather ironic that Croasmun and Cherwitz use consensus to support an argument against consensus! Each time the authors offer a citation from some outside authority to buttress their position, instead of developing a closely reasoned argument, they commit a logical fallacy and they lend credence to the consensual views of knowledge which they set out to oppose.

Croasmun and Cherwitz call upon Blocker: "If it makes sense to speak of an interpretation, it must make sense to speak of that of which it is an interpretation."[6] But Blocker's statement offers little assistance, because he fails to explicate where interpretations exist--either 'out there' or intersubjectively. He also overlooks the simple rejoinder that an interpretation can be of another interpretation and not of 'reality'. Croasmun and Cherwitz use quotations from Edelman and Eriksson to little avail. Edelman asserts that the tendency to take current opinions as immutable "is the disposition of the anxious mind."[7] This can be construed as a simple historical observation on the process of conceptual change (which supports social knowledge theorists more than Croasmun and Cherwitz), as a comment about psychology and mental health, or as an ad hominem attack. In short, Edelman's assertion can be dismissed as irrelevant. The same can be said for the extreme language used by Erikkson: "What will be left if we cannot make controlled relativizations of knowledge is a maze of irrationalization, traditionalism, and pure force."[8] Even if Croasmun and Cherwitz are deeply alarmed by the prospects of "uncontrolled relativization," whatever that expression might mean, it is hardly fair to imply that scholars in the tradition of the sociology of knowledge will impose their views on others by force, or that society will deteriorate into a brutish, irrational mass.

III

I next would like to review the three major examples that Croasmun and Cherwitz employ to support their position. These examples are not unambiguous successes.

Croasmun and Cherwitz refer to the Nixon Presidency to argue: "Clearly, if situations could be created exclusively through rhetoric, there would have been no basis for the shifting consensus during the Nixon years....For while rhetoric may create perceptions (accurate or inaccurate accounts of a situation), such an assertion is not tantamount to the more encompassing claim that rhetoric creates reality."[9] If I understand the authors' reasoning, they are arguing that the 'reality' of the Watergate affair stood over against any attempt by the Nixon Administration to create a rhetorical situation in which the existence of wrongdoing was denied. In the course of this argument, Croasmun and Cherwitz rely upon Bitzer[10] to support their position that discourse arises as a response to an exigency, and they oppose Vatz's point of view--rhetoric may 'create' situations.[11]

Let us set aside the question of whether Croasmun and Cherwitz use Bitzer only from the point of view of an appeal to authority, since this has been discussed above, and let us also not conjecture on whether Vatz's position has been distorted. The crux of the matter is: Did President Nixon's demise come about because of the discrepancy between "rhetoric" and "facts"? I suggest that the process leading up to President Nixon's resignation was not so simple as the resolution of a conflict between "rhetoric" and "facts," as Croasmun and Cherwitz imply. Instead, I submit that the critical encounter was not between rhetoric and reality, but between rhetoric and rhetoric, as it were, over what would be counted as "facts."

Croasmun and Cherwitz's example, ironically, can be used to support the position which they oppose.

"Modern communication theory sees communication as the process of creating the perspectives that give rise to ideas and facts. Communication is not simply one of many things that persons do in relationships; it is the process of maintaining and creating relationships."[12] This understanding of communication is similar in level of complexity to the developing view of history. Apparently, Croasmun and Cherwitz believe that there are events in history and then interpretations of these events. On one level, no one would disagree with that assertion. On another level, this position is too simplistic. A more complex view of history acknowledges that events occur with interpretation, or that communication/interpretation creates relationships. Then, a (not <u>the</u>) history may be written of these events/interpretation/communication/rhetoric. Later, another history may be written of the same configuration of factors, or of a slightly different configuration--so-called revisionist history. Which is the real or true history?

To answer that question, let us take a less recent example. What were the causes of World War I? There is little doubt that Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated immediately prior to the outbreak of hostilities, but one history may stress this occurrence as a cause of the War, while a revisionist history may understand World War I in a different light altogether. The descriptive term "true" does not readily apply to history. Other categories of description are necessary.

When Croasmun and Cherwitz refer to Watergate, they miss the complexity of communication and history. In 1983, Croasmun and Cherwitz's overly simple view of the Watergate affair is being challenged by the "rehabilitation" of

President Nixon. It is quite possible that a revisionist history of Watergate will appear that will confound Croasmun and Cherwitz's thesis. It is certainly true, even at present, that not everyone in the nation adheres or has ever adhered to the viewpoint that the authors express on the Watergate affair.

Croasmun and Cherwitz argue that Kuhn[13] and Ziman can be read in such a way as to support the position that agreement does not create knowledge. I will focus upon their interpretation of Kuhn, which seems to me to be completely inaccurate.

First, notice how distant Kuhn's statement of his position is from the interpretation of his position presented by Croasmun and Cherwitz: "There is, I think, no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like 'really there'; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its 'real' counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle."[14] Illusive in principle--I emphasize this point to indicate to what an extent Croasmun and Cherwitz have distorted Kuhn's position on the subject of 'reality'.

Compare also Croasmun and Cherwitz's reliance upon the concept "truth" with Kuhn's reluctance to employ that expression: "It is now time to notice that until the last very few pages the term 'truth' had entered this essay only in a quotation from Francis Bacon....nothing that has been or will be said makes it a process of evolution toward anything."[15] This direct statement from Kuhn completely overthrows Croasmun and Cherwitz's portrayal of him: "Kuhn's position thus seems to indicate that consensus-seeking is a method for more effectively striving for truth...."[16] Kuhn, obviously, rejects both the use of the term "truth" and the metaphor of evolution or striving toward truth.

I find it to be remarkable, finally, that Croasmun and Cherwitz try to claim Kuhn as an ally in their opposition of consensus-theories, especially in light of Kuhn's strong support of the centrality of the community structure of science. According to Kuhn, "The very existence of science depends upon vesting the power to choose between paradigms in the members of a special kind of community."[17] It is this emphasis on the role of the community that locates Kuhn squarely in the knowledge-as-agreement camp. Croasmun and Cherwitz fail to appreciate the incommensurability of their views with those of Kuhn.

The third major example that Croasmun and Cherwtiz summon to support their viewpoint is based on the sociology of knowledge. They acknowledge that it is somewhat remarkable to enlist Mannheim to support their thesis, but they plunge ahead nevertheless. Their reading of Mannheim is suspect, however, on the grounds that the points of agreement are trivial and that they have forced Mannheim's writings into an ill-fitting framework. For instance, when Croasmun and Cherwitz refer to "the testing of individual perspectives in a critical-dialectical manner,"[18] I cannot understand why this process is not a social process and/or a consensus-building process, completely in keeping not with their views but with sociology of knowledge views.

The authors' discussion of Mannheim leads them to an interesting concluding statement: "...objectivity...provides criteria for the evaluation of truth claims...."[19] I am very much perplexed by what this statement might mean. My confusion is heightened by the fact that this conclusion immediately follows an exposition on Mannheim's opposition to 'absolutism'. What is the difference between "objectivity" and "absolutism"? The former can be employed

as a justification for the latter. Both can be tyrannical. Yet the central question for Croasmun and Cherwitz to face is: What are the criteria for determining 'objectivity', and are these criteria developed by each individual or through a social process? I assume that Croasmun and Cherwitz would not claim that each individual should set his or her own standards of objectivity. This places them in the uncomfortable position of having to agree that standards of 'objectivity' are socially determined.

IV

These issues lead us naturally to offer a few suggestions on directions that might be worth exploring if it is agreed that Croasmun and Cherwitz's fear of relativism is unfounded. I do not offer a systematic alternative. My aim here is to engage in what Rorty calls "useful kibitzing" on the subject of overcoming the fear of relativism.

First, it is instructive to review Toulmin's exposition on the relative merits of absolutist and relativist approaches to the question of rational standards. For Toulmin, neither the absolutist nor the relativist is able to come to grips with conceptual change because both rely upon a commitment to logical systematicity.[20] Therefore, from Toulmin's perspective, Croasmun and Cherwitz are misled when they joust with "rhetorical relativism," because even the relativism that they oppose is not able to encompass the rationality of conceptual change. Toulmin suggests that an impartial standpoint of rationality is necessary.

I believe that Toulmin's criticism of Croasmun and Cherwitz's position is penetrating but not totally helpful. I grant him that conceptual change is a significant issue which absolutism and relativism have not addressed

adequately. Yet I remain unconvinced that an impartial standpoint of rationality will answer the question: What is a dependable guarantor of knowledge?

Second, I refer the reader to Rorty's analysis of the current state of affairs: "...we need to turn outward rather than inward, toward the social context of justification rather than to the relations between inner representations."[21] This project is quite different than Croasmun and Cherwitz's modified thesis--argumentative seeking of consensus can be a tool for gaining knowledge. The difference is that Croasmun and Cherwitz are trapped by their conceptual scheme. They are almost unable to see that conversation (in Rorty's sense) about the social context of justification is discourse not about knowledge but about agreement.

Rorty's analysis is helpful because he points to the positive aspects of conversation about the guarantors of knowledge. He is not terrified by the prospect that there may be great incommensurability between fields. In fact, Rorty is determined to cast philosophy in a new light. Instead of serving as the final word in all conversations--the ultimate commensuration for all human activities and inquiries--Rorty argues that philosphy should be simply another voice in those conversations. In response to the cry of "relativism," Rorty replies:

> ...the cultural role of the edifying philosopher is to help us avoid the self-deception which comes from believing that we know ourselves by knowing a set of objective facts....To see relativism lurking in every attempt to formulate conditions for truth or reality or goodness which does not attempt to provide uniquely individuating conditions we must adopt the "Platonic" notion of the transcendental terms...the Truth, the the Real, Goodness....We must think of the true referents of these terms as conceivably having no connection whatever with the practices of justification which obtain among us....The point of edifying philosophy...is to prevent man from deluding himself

> with the notion that he knows himself, or anything else, except under optional descriptions. [22]

Third, Willard ventures even further into these topics when he attempts to reformulate the dispute between the "justificationists" and the "relativists." Willard's hunch is that the traditional understanding of the conflict may be clarified by a closer look at communication processes and argument fields: "...justification and relativity are not best seen as the regnant constructs they have been historically....The highest order construct for epistemic purposes is 'communication', and its immediate subordinate is 'perspectivity'....we are (thus) jettisoning the assumption that a guarantor of knowledge cannot (by definition) be a product of social-psychological processes." [23] Willard calls for empirical study of the judgmental and veridical standards that are operative (and trusted by social actors) in all the various argument fields.

In this light, Croasmun and Cherwitz's fear of relativism may be seen as the result of cultural blindness. If Willard is correct, then we are surrounded by examples of various veridical standards at work. Each argument field may have its own guarantors of what is accepted as knowledge, and these, apparently, work quite effectively despite scholarly fears of "relativism."

Rescher, fourth, offers an interesting insight into the veridical standards that are operative within the natural sciences. His "methodological pragmatism" is an important contribution to understanding the marriage of rational merits that are (1) internal, systematic, and coherentist and (2) external, applicative, and pragmatist. [24] For Rescher, so-called truth criteria are methodologies or instrumentalities for obtaining truths.

"Objective truth" is not a helpful expression. A position is accepted as true, ad interim, because through a dialectical process of disputation, and through the application of vigorous tests of burden of proof and pragmatic justification, it has been declared to be the most plausible case.

It remains to be seen if the processes at work and the veridical standards that Rescher has described in the natural sciences also can be found at work in other fields. I am confident that Rescher's analysis of the combination of rhetorical processes and the need for action will be a helpful framework outside of the natural sciences. Indeed, this framework appears to be applicable to the activities of naive social actors.

Conclusion

I have tried to point out problems and deficiencies in Croasmun and Cherwitz's position. I have demonstrated that their argument is weak, their conceptual framework is confused, and their conclusion is lacking in force. In short, their fear of relativism is unfounded and, in fact, prevents them from exploring a 'strong' sense of rhetoric as epistemic.

I briefly have suggested some directions to be explored, following Toulmin, Rorty, Willard, and Rescher. My positive recommendation is that communication scholars and rhetoricians, philosophers and scientists, explore the notions of 'agreement' and 'consensus' free from the inhibiting fear of relativism. The point may not be, as Croasmun and Cherwitz suggest, to get "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism." Rather, the crux of the matter may be to converse about why and how persons strive for the level of certainty that they require in all their various pursuits.

Notes

[1] Earl Croasmun and Richard A. Cherwitz, "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 68(1982), pp. 1-16.

[2] Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 389.

[3] Croasmun and Cherwitz, p. 2.

[4] Croasmun and Cherwitz, p. 10.

[5] Rorty, pp. 126-127.

[6] H. Gene Blocker, "Back to Reality," Metaphilosophy, 5(1974), p. 236.

[7] Murray Edelman, Politics as Symbolic Action (Chicago: Markham, 1971), pp. 43-44.

[8] Bjorn Erikkson, Problems of an Empirical Sociology of Knowledge (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1975), p. 31.

[9] Croasmun and Cherwitz, p. 12.

[10] Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1(1968), pp. 1-14.

[11] Richard Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 6(1973), pp. 154-161.

[12] Vernon E. Cronen, W. Barnett Pearce, and Linda M. Harris, "The Coordinated Management of Meaning: A Theory of Communication," in Frank E. X. Dance (ed.), Human Communication Theory (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 64-65.

[13] Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 1970). See also, Thomas S. Kuhn,

"Reflections on My Critics," in I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (eds.), Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge (Cambridge: University Press, 1970).

[14] Kuhn, TSOSR, p. 206.

[15] Kuhn, TSOSR, p. 170.

[16] Croasmun and Cherwitz, p. 13.

[17] Kuhn, TSOSR, p. 167.

[18] Croasmun and Cherwitz, pp. 15-16.

[19] Croasmun and Cherwitz, p. 16.

[20] Stephen Toulmin, Human Understanding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972)

[21] Rorty, p. 210.

[22] Rorty, pp. 373-379.

[23] Charles Arthur Willard, Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge (University of Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1983), p. 4.

[24] Nicholas Rescher, Methodological Pragmatism (New York: New York University Press, 1977).